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Patriotism Through Education Series

Why British Labor Supports the War

BY

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Why British Labor Supports the War

By J. A. Seddon.

Mr. Seddon is one of the best known and most influential of British labor leaders. He is a former President of the National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants—a union which he helped to organize—and was Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress. This last office is the supreme honor organized British labor can bestow. From 1906 *to* 1910 *he was Labor Member of Parliament for the Newton Division of Lancashire.*

At the outbreak of war, Mr. Seddon promptly and unhesitatingly took up the national cause. He has since done notable service. Previously he had been an outspoken opponent of militarism in any form.

In the following article he shows how the same fundamental principles which once made him a pacifist—love of liberty, love of justice, and a desire for the well-being of mankind—to-day make him, and the overwhelming mass of British workers, stern supporters of the war.

Before the outbreak of the Great War, organized British labor was wholly pacifist. We were opposed to militarism in every shape and form. We fought the increase of armaments. We did our best to allay anything which might be likely to promote the growth of the fighting spirit among our people. We looked to see the spirit of international friendship spread till all nations were united in world peace.

We believed that the burden of war falls most heavily on the worker. The Trades Union Congress, the Parliament of British Labor, representing close on three millions of organized toilers, had not so much as a trace of a militarist party in it. This was as true of the last annual gathering of the Congress before the outbreak of war, as it was of any Congress for years before. It was true of

the Parliamentary Committee of the Congress, its executive and administration body. I can speak on that point with some authority, for I was Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee. The Congress was anti-war. My colleagues on the Committee were anti-war. I was anti-war.

To-day British labor whole-heartedly supports the war against Germany. My same colleagues, who, before August, 1914, were teaching peace, are now working to the utmost of their power to help in the great fight. In order to help on the war and to bring victory, our trades unions have sacrificed, for the time, many jealously guarded rights. which we and our fathers had won only after long struggles.

Men who led the campaign for short hours of work are now themselves working long hours on war tasks. The trades unions have permitted the dilution of labor, the introduction of women and semi-skilled men in what were solely skilled men's tasks. Many trades union regulations have been wiped out for the time by the trades unions themselves. The unions have passed self-denying ordinances against strikes. Disputes that once would have made fifty thousand men lay down their tools in an hour are now endured until opportunity comes to get them put right.

Labor Volunteers.

Labor has done more than approve of the war and work to help on the war. Long before conscription became law, hundreds of thousands of men gave up regular work to enlist voluntarily in the Army. If you want to know the truth about the British working man as a fighter, study the records of the British Army. The Scottish regiments, that enrolled tens of thousands from the Clyde; the Lancashire regiments, largely recruited from factory hands and miners; the Durham regiments, with their colliers; the regiments recruited in practically every industrial centre tell the same story. These are the men and the sons of the men who fought militarism before 1914. Now they are fighting, and often enough dying, in the Army, and are glad and proud to do so.

Why?

What has brought about this great change?

We have learned that Prussian militarism must be destroyed, root and branch, and the only way to destroy it is

to fight it. We have realized that this war is a death grapple between systems which cannot co-exist if freedom is to be something more than a name. We know what the horrors of war are. We know who is responsible for those horrors.

In my own case, my official position made it necessary for me, when war broke out, to consider all the facts of the situation, not merely from my personal point of view, but as a representative of labor. Accordingly, I studied the State papers issued by the different Governments, by Germany and Austria, as well as by England, France and Russia. To me the evidence in these document was unmistakable. Germany had first brought about the situation leading up to the war, and then had forced the war on Europe.

Austria Germany's Tool.

Using Austria as her tool, and the assassination of the Austrian Crown Prince as a pretext, she had kindled the blaze of war at the moment she thought most favorable to herself. She made Austria insist on impossible terms from Serbia, and refuse any modification, knowing that this would lead to war. She got Russia to mobilize by a trick. She refused mediation.

She was ready. England, France and Russia were not. She did not believe that England would or could come to the aid of France and Russia. She thought that she saw world supremacy in her grasp, and she grabbed at it.

Germany started the war. England and her allies did their best to avoid it.

That is what the State papers told me. These papers are published and are open to the world. Read them. Read what each Government had to say in those fateful days, and see if you do not come to the same conclusion. Other British trades union leaders studied the matter as I had done, and thought as I did. We issued a manifesto which was widely circulated.

Shortly afterwards I went America, to take a message from the toilers of Great Britain to the workers of the United States and Canada. Here I had opportunity to learn more of events that had led up to the war. I met prominent neutrals, who had had entry into some of the

most influential circles in Berlin. They told me what they knew of German ambitions and preparations. I saw that there had been a deliberate conspiracy of the Kaiser's Government, that had stretched over a number of years, to plunge the world in war. The idea of "Deutschland uber Alles" dominated the minds of the German leaders. They were going to make Germany over all. Knowing that the main opposition to this would come from England, they had cultivated the hatred of their people against us.

"Germany's Work."

This war was Germany's work, and Germany's purpose was to secure world domination. British labor was opposed to war. But British labor was and is infinitely more opposed to the establishment of a system that would place the nations at the mercy of Prussian bureaucracy! Better many years of war than this. We realize that Prussianism and freedom cannot exist side by side.

The German violation of Belgian territory stirred the British working men, for we could not understand a nation boasting of its culture treating its solemn treaty obligations as mere scraps of waste paper. But when we knew how the people were being treated, the passion of our race was fully aroused.

When accounts came to England of outrages committed by German troops against Belgian civilians, most of us at first did not believe them. Even though the Germans were our enemies, we refused to credit them with actions so vile. We thought that possibly a few individual acts had been exaggerated and magnified. We did not propose to blame the whole of a nation for the excesses of a few of its members. We gave Germany credit for some respect for the humane conventions which she herself had accepted and promised to observe.

But before long we had to believe. We learned on proved evidence that the horrors we had at first refused to think possible were only a part—and by no means the worst—of what was going on. Many of the deeds of the Prussian Army in Belgium were so terrible that they could only be whispered from man to man. We found that the reign of terror in the conquered territory—the burning of villages, the shooting of peaceful priests, schoolmasters and

doctors as hostages, the outraging of young girls and married women, and the wholesale destruction of homes—was no chance excess of individuals, but the systematic and deliberate policy of the German Government, prepared for in advance, and carried through without justice or mercy.

"No Compromise."

I cannot describe the effect of this on British labor. We realized that Prussian militarism, with its attested cruelty, rapine, murder, must be destroyed in every shape and form. We realized that now there could be no compromise and no slackening. This aggressive militarism must be overthrown, or all our efforts would have been in vain.

The revelations acted as a flame to a torch. We were facing the issue chiefly from the point of moral values. Our people have an appreciation of right and wrong. We knew without argument that a nation fighting with weapons such as Germany employed in Belgium must be wrong.

To-day our first refusal to believe in the German outrages may be considered extraordinary. We have had much evidence since, from the sinking of the Lusitania to the submarine murders of wounded on Red Cross ships, of how Germany makes war. The deeds Germany has admitted, deeds officially described and glorified, are her own condemnation. But at the beginning of the war we did not think them possible. We did not believe that any nation claiming to be civilized could sink to such depths.

I undertook a series of recruiting meetings on my return to England. Time after time, when I described what had happened to the people of Belgium, whole audiences were stirred as they had been stirred by nothing else. Men sprang to their feet, volunteering to enlist and go to fight. They did not even wait to go home and talk it over with their wives. They were willing someone else should tell the "Missus."

The Englishman loves a scrap. That is part of his racial inheritance. He is never against joining in a rough-and-tumble. But it was not love of a scrap that led him to join in now. He had had a rude awakening. A situation had arisen undreamed of in his philosophy. His dream castle of peace had tumbled about his ears. His sense of

nationality, his sense of justice, his hatred of wrong, united to arouse his slumbering passion.

Mischief Makers.

It was in those days that British labor made up its mind that no sacrifice was too great, no struggle too long, no effort too mighty to settle this menace to the world. Everything that has happened since has strengthened our conviction. Prussian militarism must go or freedom must go.

I may be told that British labor is not unanimous. "What of the strikes on the Clyde, and at Barrow, and of the labor struggle in South Wales?" I may be asked. These troubles were comparatively small, and were the work of a few well-known mischief-makers. Some of us would deal with these mischief-makers in much more drastic fashion than our authorities do. I would send them to the trenches, under escort, to learn what war is.

The trades unions did not recognize the strikes, and did their best to end them. Some of the men in them did not understand what they were doing. It is not always easy for a man working closely over a forge or in a mine to realize the actualities of war conditions. I went to some of the men on strike. "You have sent your sons to fight," I said. "Are you going to leave them in the trenches without cartridges or shells, to be shot down by the enemy? For that is what your striking means. Are you going to let them be put up to be potted without having a shot to send back?" "Ah!" said one man, "I didn't think of it that way!"

The trouble-makers haven't had much success. The strikes have not lasted long. And surely the fact that there have been so few strikes, and for so short a time, is the best evidence of how British labor as a whole has worked for the war.

What of the conscientious objectors—the "C. O.'s"? What of the people in England who refuse to fight? There are not many of them, but there are a few. We trades unionists regard the conscientious objectors as national blacklegs. They accept the protection provided by the nation, and the security established by our fighting men. They receive the benefits of our national organization, and are trying to escape from paying their fair dues. Trades unions get rid

of blacklegs. I would clear these national blacklegs out of the land.

Changes Being Worked.

The course of the war is bringing about far-reaching changes in British labor, changes the full effects of which are as yet scarcely realized. All classes have commingled in the trenches, and have perhaps learned to understand one another better. The men of the Overseas Forces, who have come among us in their hundred thousands, have helped the British workers to realize the Empire. Men born in Toronto and Melbourne have fought side by side with men born in Liverpool and Sheffield.

The progress of the war and my experiences during a visit to France helped to convince me that until international disarmament comes and the character of the German is transformed, we must guard ourselves by national service against future dangers. The so-called voluntary system cost us dearly. Witness the destruction of so many of our first Expeditionary Force in France, because we had not the trained men to send to their support.

I believe that the nation must create a system which will give us security for the future, and that such a system can be established without dislocating the industry of the country. We cannot risk the repetition of 1914.

The coming of America into the war has brought fresh hope and encouragement. I never had any doubt of the sympathy of vast masses of American people. I saw much of them in the early days of the war. I have heard much from them since. President Wilson's speech declaring war revealed the greatness of his conception. It thrilled England. I started reading it when beginning a railway journey. I passed several stations beyond my destination before I had finished. I had forgotten everything but the President's words. Now that America is by our side the sympathy and friendship between the workers of our two lands will be closer than ever. For our aims are one.

Terrible as this war has been, and heavy as its cost, I am yet profoundly convinced that it is bringing us new vision, new hopes, new life. A common sorrow over our lost ones is helping to break down many old barriers. The sense of a common fellowship is uniting us.

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